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Subject: Basin-Plateau Aboriginal Socio-Political Groups

by J. H. Steward

By: R. S. MacNeish

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The article is an excellent endeavor in the field of Anthropology to attain scientific generalizations comparable to those of our ~~alleged~~ "true sciences" (i. e. physics, chemistry, etc.). Steward's methods, besides his objectives, are also noteworthy, for he displays real insight in grasping the problems involved and supplying the relevant facts. Knowing Steward's background in archaeology, ethno-history, and his early training at the University of California under Kroeber (in ethnology, I presumed), I had expected upon choosing this book some sort of history of the socio-political groups of the Basin-plateau aborigines. To my complete surprise and enjoyment, I found a manuscript, though dealing with limited problems, that can be categorized with the most scientific works of the social sciences.

However, let me present the problems that our author has attempted to solve. These problems may be divided into two groups which I choose to characterize as primary problems (major objectives) and secondary problems or immediate objectives. These two sets of problems may be best understood by calling the secondary problems the field problems, while the primary group might be called the general laboratory problems.

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In the preface Steward names the three objectives of his research in the Basin-Plateau area. Here they are called the secondary problems.

"1) The first to make an ethnographic reconnaissance of the western Shoshone and some of their Northern Paiute, Ute and Southern Paiute neighbors.

2) The second objective was to analyze the functional relationships of the different parts of the culture to one another and to the local environment.

3) The third aim was to ascertain the type of Shoshonean socio-political groups and to discover their ecological and social determinants."

The major problems are of a different nature, being an attempt to derive ~~more~~ explanatory data concerning human culture as opposed to those endeavoring to acquire descriptive data (i.e. our secondary problems). The first of these problems is that of seeing the correlation of new evidence to this previously studied generalization.

"All peoples in an area of low population density have some form of political autonomous land-owning band, which is greater than the bilateral family. The size of the band and the extent of the territory it utilized are determined by the number of persons who, due largely to ecological factors, habitually cooperate at least part of the annual round of economic and social activities. Band unity is expressed in a consciousness of common interest and submission to some degree of central control during community enterprises, although such control may be lacking during parts

In the prefact Steward manes

parts of the year. The authority of the leader is consequently small and temporary and his position is seldom a fixed institution."

In this monograph the problem was restated as being: to ascertain if "hunters and gatherers in low population areas".... had..."certain simple socio-political patterns" that "occurred repeatedly and were largely explainable in terms of human ecology." There had been offered as evidence of verification of this generalization studies of the Bushman, Australians, Tasmanians, Negritos, Fuegians, Athabascans and Algonquins. Since the Basin-Plateau people were also simple hunters and gatherers with a sparse and scattered population, the problem reduces to whether these Basin-Plateau aborigines, the Shoshonean groups, manifested the same socio-political patterns.

The final problem has been alluded to in the various other problems, and is rather difficult to take out of context. In the definition of the first primary problem I have underlined the pertinent inferences and now state them as a postulate to the major problem, "to ascertain the effect of ecology upon the socio-political institutions" and the rest of the behavior patterns of a culture. To grasp the significance of this problem it becomes necessary to define the word ecology. Steward in his article does not specifically do this. However, one can grasp what he means from his various discussions of the concept. I interpret from Steward's works that human ecology means those modes of human behavior by which people adapt to the environment and that this adaptation is

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In the prefact Steward makes

an interaction of the elements available in the natural environment and the technology by which an environment may be exploited. Thus the final problem may also be restated "to ascertain how behavior patterns ~~are~~ are affected when a certain environment is exploited by certain economic devices."

The above mentioned problems pre-suppose certain assumptions. These are of the most basic kind, and their sources may be found in the theoretical constructs of other anthropologists. The first and second assumptions reflect the concepts of Malinowski:

1. The different parts of a culture are functionally inter-related in such a way that if one part of the culture changes, the other parts change as well.
2. That all human behavior patterns have certain ecological, psychological and social determinents.

The third assumption would be that:

3. The environment conditions and delimits these determinents of social behavior.

The final supposition appears to stem from ~~Sherwood's~~ early training under Kroeber at the University of California. For both Kroeber and Sherwood would definately envisage the environmental factors (or as ~~our author~~ Sherwood might say the environment as manifested in the ecological factors) as modifiers of a culture. The validity of these postulates is not here under scrutiny and any proof of the assumptions can only be inferred from the data presented.

With these postulates Steward set out to solve problems. His methods, though thorough and systematic are hard to discern. His field methods are those of using informants (about two or three to

a tribe) to understand the social system of each Shoshonean group (twenty-nine in all). The culture of each group is then analyzed in the light of their particular natural environment. Finally, all this information is analyzed to give a composite picture of the social system of all the tribes in the area and show how the social and political part of this composite social system has been determined by social and ecological factors. The results of this last analysis are then compared with the generalizations made concerning other social systems of other tribes due to their environment have a similar ecology. The method may be summed up as being inductive comparison of the synchronic functional relationship of one part of the culture to another, and to the environment.

However, a summation of the data to illustrate the method Steward uses in no way does his monograph justice due to lack of concreteness. Therefore, I will present the data used to solve the problems. He begins, having previously defined his problems, by giving a brief culture history of the Basin region. He sees slim archaeological evidence of early man in the region and no evidence of Basket Maker II culture, although a food gathering group does appear early. Next he sees a slight penetration of the area by Pueblo group that soon dies out. After that there seems to be evidence of a group called Promontory people who pass through the region, followed by the rapid spread of the Shoshonean groups into the region. A historic period follows this with four divisions of white contact:

- 1) Exploration and penetration of the territory by trappers; 220 im-

migration through the region; 3) settlement by miners and farmers who were in conflict with the Indians and finally 4) removal of the Indians to reservations.

The next section deals with the geographical environment and subsistence. Here he describes the physical landscape which is irregular, high, having little water which when existing flows in rugged channels into alkaline lakes and basins. This area is between the Coastal Mountain ranges and the Rocky Mountain range, and north of the San Juan and Colorado rivers and south of the Canadian Rockies. The temperature, though varying, was moderate and rainfall, light. The discussion of the physical landscape is followed by a detailed study of the fauna and flora in the area with particular reference to the food supply that consists of seeds, berries, buds, and roots of a variety of plant species. The only other foods that were available in the region were animal and exceedingly sparse (except in the north where salmon and buffalo were present).

The economic pattern which tended to exploit the environment was extremely simple. All division of labor was by sexes; women gathered food plants and men hunted. ^{The technique was simple and} Specialization was non-existent, and individuals manufactured whatever implements they needed. The concept of money and trade and economic ritual seem rarely to have existed as the environment was so limited that no surplus of supplies or time existed. The final section of this background material deals with the population density which may be characterized as low (on the average one person per 15.6 square miles). Of course exceptions existed where the food supply was larger.

With the above mentioned material as an introduction, our author presents a brief description of each of the twenty-nine sociopolitical groups of the different areas. Within the study of each group he describes the following parts of the sociopolitical behavior pattern (when the information is available):

1. The natural environment and the extent of the area which the group exploits.
2. The subsistence activities used in exploiting the environment.
3. The type of group that exists in the area - village, band family etc.
4. The cohesive ^{social} elements by which the group maintains its solidarity such as festivals, warfare, mourning ceremonies, and the communal sweat-house activities.
5. The form of leadership or chieftenship that any exist, and the connected political organization.
6. The types of marriage and that family that are basic to the group.

The exact data gathered I do not intend to deal with. The nearest I shall come to describing this data is to present a summary view of Steward's analysis of the functional relationships of the different parts of the culture. In concluding this presentation of factual material let me say that the first part of the secondary problems has been solved. This ^{social history} ~~data~~ represents a seemingly accurate "ethnographic reconnaissance of the western Shoshone and some of their Northern Paiute, Ute, and southern Paiute neighbors."

The next section of Steward's paper is an analysis of ~~data~~ ethnographic data and the solution of the remaining secondary problems. The study of the social and political patterns reveals the different parts of the culture functionally related to one another and to the environment. The biological family was the basic economic, social and political unit and usually consisted of a man and wife, their children and additional relatives, averaging about ten people. This small size was necessary as the environment was rigid, the technology limited, and starvation always imminent. Cohesion of this unit was necessitated by ecological factors. Also, strong kinship bonds existed, as cooperation and assistance of groups larger than the bilateral family was often an economic necessity. Marriage created this unit which functioned economically, insuring the survival of the individual; biologically, insuring certain sex privileges and procreation; and socially, guaranteeing security for the children and the kinship group. Basic to marriage was the concept of sex equality, determined by the economic system in which both the husband and wife were food providers. Because of this equality both polyandry and polygyny, along with the sororate and levirate, existed. Temporary post-marital matrilocal residence was widespread throughout the area and acted as a compensatory factor for the taking of women out of the basic family unit. Most of these marriage and kinship forms could be related to the ecology.

When the ecology allowed, groups larger than the family unit did exist either temporarily or permanently. The ecological fact-

The next section of Steward's paper is an analysis of d

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 ors here involved were concerned with the use of the horse, hunting buffalo, and gathering food in fertile valleys. In such cases, the social determinants are warfare, festivals, mourning ceremonies, and sweat lodges. These integrating forces maintain group unity in the absence of the usual ecological forces. The group larger than the family unit formed a political organization known as the band. The band usually consisted of the combination of a number of families and its permanency was interrelated to the subsistence. Obviously, in this area the occurrence of the bands was rare and spasmodic as the environment normally limited large community enterprises. The only occurrence of bands was in the Owens valley where streams made for a stable supply of food. This permitted a large group to live permanently in one area. Each band did own certain territories in which they lived and gathered food. Bands also occurred in the north where the herds of buffalo necessitated hunting in large nomadic groups or where the horse allowed the large groups to gather food over a wide area. These bands did not own any specific territory. Occasionally bands did occur in other areas due to special conditions such as warfare, group hunting, and salmon fishing.

Political control of these bands was centered in chiefs whose authority depended upon personality factors. The main function of these individuals was that of administering and leading group activities. Leadership in the units smaller than the bands was usually under the head of a household or a "persuasive talker". These individuals maintained only a loose advisory control.

Thus I conclude this summation of the functional relationships of the different parts of the Basin-Plateau culture to one another

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and to the environment by which Steward solves his second secondary problem. Also, included in this summation I have indicated the social and ecological determinents of the different sociopolitical groups to be found in this area; this solves Steward's third secondary problem. Now let us consider the solution of the major problems.

As may readily be seen, only part of this data seems to fit into the previously stated generalizations. The Owens Valley groups point by point fit the ^{previously stated} ~~major~~ generalizations but ^{general statements} ~~generalizations~~ made about the other groups cannot be coordinated with the major generalizations. This information though not invalidating his former conclusions does necessitate a restatement of his problems and a supplementary hypothesis to the original generalization. The problem I did restate in the beginning as being "whether hunters and gatherers in low population areas"...had "certain simple sociopolitical patterns"...that "occurred repeatedly and were largely explainable in terms of human ecology." As may be seen the Basin-Plateau data still does conform with this in part but somewhere a corrolary must be added to the effect that if these socio-political patterns do not exist in these hunting and gathering groups living in an area of low population density then it is due to ecological factors. This corollary is not stated by Steward.

The final section of the paper, entitled Ecology in Culture Studies seems to be added to solve the final ~~major~~ problem of ascertaining the effect of ecology upon socio-political institutions. With particular reference to primitive societies like those of the

Basin Plateau groups, he concludes that ecology conditions and determined most of the patterns of behavior in the culture and particularly those patterns of behavior in the socio-political ~~and~~ institutions. The empirical evidence is readily discernible in the preceding pages. The wider implications of the problem remains unsolved, though a brief statement made concerning ecology and economics in more complex societies.

A critical investigation of the paper reveals that the clear, concise stating of his problems is good, his method of gaining the data and presenting the ^{it} ~~data~~ is systematic, the analytical comparative method solves most of his problems, and his interest in generalizations concerning culture are noteworthy. However, certain parts of the paper can be criticized.

Steward's inclusion of the History of the Basin Plateau Area is not good. First, his statement that little or no Basket Maker II or early man material are to be found in the region is incorrect. Cressman and others recently have pointed out that material found at Lovelock cave, Catlow cave, and Roaring Springs cave do belong to the culture complex called Basket Maker II. The remains of early man were in evidence at Gypsum Cave, Catlow cave, when the book was written. Secondly, his concept of a Shoshone migration into the area at a late date has been refuted by him in the Swanton Memorial Volume, 1940 where he shows that ^{represented} ~~that~~ development in the Lovelock cave materials. Thirdly, the inclu-

sion of this historic material in a synchronic study seems unnecessary.

The second criticism of Steward's work is of the use of the word ecology. Although he infers a definition of the word, he does not state specifically what he means. In the paper he should have defined clearly this key word.

He also is not consistent in his use of the word ecology. In some cases, he seems to be substituting the concept 'ecology' for 'technology'. For example, it is stated "bands form when transportation was so improved that large groups could live together and either bring their food to a central point or travel as a body in search of them. Ecology thus permitted, if it did not cause, band development." However, in other connotations, he sees it not as technology. For example, he states, "Ecology, or modes of behavior by which human beings adapt themselves to the environment."

In Steward's study of the different parts of the Basin Plateau culture very little has been said concerning one of the most fundamental parts of the culture in that area, i.e. shamanism. Park has stated its importance in his work Shamanism in Western North America. Steward's negligence in ignoring this important part of the culture makes his study incomplete. Furthermore, shamanism is usually an integrative factor and in Steward's analysis of social determinants of the group a mention of this practice should be included.

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Finally, the conclusions of this work do not agree with his first major generaliza^tion concerning the correla^tion of a band type of political organization and hunting and food gathering type of economy. He states that this "requires supplementary hypotheses." Nowhere does he offer them. If he is to connect clearly this new evidence with that of his major generalization, then he ^hould have supplied his supplementary hypotheses.

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